

A Diaconal Letter on the Economy

The Order of Deacons of the Detroit Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church

To our Sister and Brother United Methodists,

We find ourselves in uncertain and challenging economic times. The sub-prime mortgage crisis, the collapse of major investment banks, and the struggling auto companies have left many in our nation and in our state vulnerable. Many people face unemployment and foreclosure, students find it harder to meet the tuition costs of higher education, and the retired see their savings dwindle.

As United Methodist deacons, charged by our denomination to “connect the church and the world,” we urge United Methodists to resist the temptations of panic, fear, and the mentality of “hunkering down” into an *insular survival mode*. Instead, we call United Methodist local churches to *prayerfully and boldly engage in creative ministry* that proclaims and embodies the good news of Jesus Christ in lives and communities demoralized and stripped of hope.

Proclamation

We believe that the church is called to prophetic proclamation that is simultaneously critical and hopeful.

The word “crisis,” itself, comes from the Greek word for judgment. We must admit that the economic crisis is a moral and spiritual crisis fueled by greed and the practices of hyper-consumption and exploitation of people and the natural world. In the face of this, it is the responsibility of the church to call for a conversion, a *metanoia*, a turning away from the spirituality of “mammon” to a different vision of our common life together founded in Christian hope.

Christian hope is grounded in the saving power of the Triune God, who in the last days will recreate heaven and earth setting all of creation into right relationship. This hope of a world transformed animates the church’s mission. It challenges the community of disciples to *imagine a world of peace, abundance, and justice and to embody -- in the here and now -- such world*.

Centered on Jesus Christ, Christian hope does not diminish pain and suffering. Even the risen Jesus, as Scripture tells us, bore the wounds of crucifixion. The loss of employment, homes, and savings, while painful and devastating, should not strip individuals and families of their dignity or their lives of meaning. *But pain, suffering, and death are not the end. Abundant life beyond and in spite of death is the gift of God through Christ. The economic crisis, in this Christian perspective, does not have the final word.*

Embodiment

As deacons we are concerned about concrete and meaningful ways our churches can be in ministry and mission.

The Methodist tradition, through the wisdom of our founder John Wesley, offers spiritual and moral guidance. Wesley, in his sermon “The Use of Money,” called on the early Methodists to “*gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.*” In other words, Wesley preached the virtues of integrity, simplicity, and generosity in financial matters.

Integrity

Wesley was deeply concerned about how Christians earned and accumulated their wealth. He strongly discouraged people from being involved in any business venture that threatened the physical, mental, and spiritual well being of themselves or others. Especially problematic was financial involvement in the slave trade

and the production of gin. Today these instructions remind us of the importance of economic practices that pursue not the good of a few, but the good of all. United Methodists must, therefore, advocate for fair wages and benefits for all workers in their workplaces, in their communities and in the nation and against practices that take advantage of the economically vulnerable in this difficult time.

Simplicity

Wesley urged his fellow Methodist to be frugal in their spending by not being wasteful and by discerning between “necessity” and “desire.” The current culture of consumerism, on the other hand, operates by leading us to confuse desire for necessity and to define ourselves by our material possessions. Coupled with this confusion is our societal desensitization to massive amounts of personal and communal debt. This self-destructive combination must be challenged. The virtue of simplicity calls us, today, to cultivate practices of faithful and wise stewardship.

Generosity

“Give all you can” instructed Wesley. This is not just tithing, but an extravagant generosity. In the midst of tough economic times this is a challenge. Wesley grounded giving in the belief that what we have is not really ours. Everything belongs to God. So, in all our use of resources we must give to God what is God’s. This means that every expenditure, every use of money, must be guided by our identity not as proprietors, but as stewards of God’s creation. All that we have is a gift from God and so must be given in love of God and in love of neighbor.

In light of this wisdom from our tradition, we offer these suggestions for your consideration:

Liturgy

We encourage church leaders to think creatively about marking liturgically the many losses and transitions facing individuals and families. Consider, for example, hosting “A Service of Healing,” sponsoring a community prayer walk that stops at the Chamber of Commerce, City Hall, financial institutions, and social service providers, or writing a litany of commitment to the virtues of integrity, simplicity, and generosity for use in Sunday worship.

Service

It is important to know the needs of your particular community. Take time to listen to members and community leaders. Think about sponsoring workshops on foreclosure or starting a job networking group offering spiritual support and skill development, such as resume writing or interviewing. Contact local charities and see how your church can assist in meeting the needs through donations and volunteers.

Justice

We encourage all United Methodists to take time to understand and be in discussion about the complexities of the financial crisis. We also encourage United Methodists to advocate for fair, living wages and health care for all workers and to reasonable and dignified treatment and assistance for those facing foreclosure. We hope that local churches will act as catalysts within their communities engaging elected, civic, and business leaders in addressing and responding to the impact of the economic crisis.

In the Service of Christ,

The Deacons of the Detroit Conference of The United Methodist Church